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AUTHOR Warren, Ron
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ABSTRACT

The Joe Camel campaign by RJR Nabisco began in 1990 in an attempt to increase the brand's sagging market share. Studies showed the campaign's appeal to young children and teenagers. In the debate that followed, several children's advocates renewed their appeals for restriction on cigarette ads. A review of the literature shows that children are at a disadvantage when confronted with television and its advertising content. Young children are more attracted by perceptual features of content, have difficulty processing all but the most explicit stimuli, and often cannot comprehend the meaning or intent of broadcast material. The government agencies that called for this research in the 1970s often ignored relevant findings when setting policy. Deregulated broadcasting of the 1980s led to a dramatic increase in the number of independent stations, children's programming, and children's advertising. The Camel campaign appealed to youngsters who read magazines like "Sports Illustrated" and saw Joe Camel on billboards and store windows. Rather than trying to guide policy, researchers should focus future work on more basic questions concerning the cognitive development of children, and how they process information from all mass media. Such study can explore the viewing and consumer situations young people face every day and how these situations trigger important steps in the cognitive development process. Such research would seem to have applications not only for school media literacy programs, but for parents wishing to raise an intelligent consumer. (Contains 120 references.) (Author/RS)

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The Big Deal Over A Camel:

What "Joe Smooth" Should Teach Us

About Children's Media Research

Ron Warren
Colorado State University

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Abstract

The Joe Camel campaign by RJR Nabisco began in 1990 in an attempt to increase the brand's sagging market share. The results were far from pleasing however, as the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published three studies which showed the cigarette's appeal to young children and teenagers. In the debate that followed, several children's advocates renewed their appeals for restrictions on cigarette ads and bans on children's advertising altogether. This paper argues that researchers and advocates must address more viable questions in children's media research rather than wasting time with government and the broadcast industry.

A review of literature shows us that children, especially very young children, are at a big disadvantage when confronted with television and its advertising content. We know now that young children are more attracted by perceptual features of content, have difficulty processing all but the most explicit stimuli, and often cannot comprehend the meaning or intent of broadcast material. The government agencies that called for this research in the 1970's often ignored all relevant findings when setting policy. Government preferred self-regulation to policy making and deregulated broadcasting under the Federal Communication Commission during the 1980's.

This, with other economic factors, led to a dramatic increase in number of independent TV stations, children's programming, and children's advertising. Many advertisers began to turn to print media (kids' magazines in particular). Their campaigns borrowed heavily from the same successful features used in television. The Camel campaign appealed to youngsters who read magazines like *Sports Illustrated* and saw Joe Camel all over billboards and store windows.

Rather than trying to guide policy, researchers should focus future work on more basic questions concerning the cognitive development of children and, more specifically, how they process information from all mass media. Such study can explore the viewing and consumer situations young people face every day. This work could also explore how these situations trigger important steps in the cognitive development process. Such research would seem to have applications not only for school media literacy programs, but for parents wishing to raise an intelligent consumer and advertisers hoping to market their products in good faith.

One year ago Americans sat down in front of the evening news and heard reports about the success of a new advertising campaign. It had been responsible for the resurgence of the advertised product in a multi-billion dollar industry and single handedly gave the brand recognition among all segments of the population. No one believed that one campaign could be responsible for such an increase in brand awareness.

The problem was that the campaign was for Camel cigarettes, and most of the recognition was coming from children. *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (Fischer, Schwartz, Richards, Goldstein, and Rojas, 1991; DiFranza, et. al., 1991; Pierce, et. al., 1991) had ignited another controversy in the heated debate over children's advertising, and Joe Camel's prodigious proboscis was at the center of the debate. Old Joe, the original "spokescamel" for the brand, was picked up from a French advertising campaign for Camel during the 1980's. His American image was concocted by ad designer Mike Salisbury in Torrance, California, who based the character's look on Sean Connery and Don Johnson (Bird, 1991). The appeal was unmistakable--kids loved Joe Smooth.

This controversy is, of course, an old one. For decades now scholars and children's advocates have questioned mass marketing of products to children. The kids' market has ballooned into one of the most profitable segments of the advertising industry. Advertisers were expected to spend $700 million to reach kids in 1991, with increases in sight for 1992 (Kornriech, 1991); $240 million was slated for network broadcasting alone, but another $20 million was spent on print advertising directly marketed to children. This signaled the rise of competing media for access to young consumers.

In the heated debate that followed the *JAMA* studies, both advocates and advertisers argued over the effects of advertising on kids, but no one learned any lessons before or after the Joe Camel controversy; government and industry have ignored research findings. After a brief review of important findings on children and media, this paper traces the decline of research in the eyes of both policy makers and industry agents. This discussion also points to the multi-media marketing strategies now used with young

audiences, then argues that research might be better directed toward an understanding of the child-media relationship rather than trying to guide policy.

Reviews of research describing the media processing skills of children abound in current literature (Signorielli, 1991; Van Evra, 1990; Bryant and Anderson, 1983; Adler, 1980; Adler, et. al., 1979; and Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977). Children's cognitive development and television is the focus of most of this material. In short, the cognitive theories hold that children are affected by media to the extent that they can process the content cognitively and relate it to their existing knowledge structure and social experience. While these skills develop and advance with chronological age, Ward, Wackman, and Wartella (1977) found that this was a loose indicator of cognitive development, since mental processing skills varied widely within children of the same age.

Research on attention to programming and advertising has shown consistent patterns in cognitive development (Anderson, et. al., 1986). Attention generally increases with age, peaking during late elementary years. Children's attention to television need not be visual (Anderson and Field, 1983; Lorch, Anderson, and Levin, 1979) as many engage in secondary activities while monitoring content aurally. Comprehension of the material often determines when children will attend to content. In younger kids this is ruled more by perceptual than informational cues (e.g., the size of a toy rather than its price). Several formal features of television content (fast cuts between shots, quick music, use of action and color, etc.) have been linked to increased attention, making these high-salience features of television production (Alwitt, Anderson, Lorch, and Levin, 1980; Anderson and Levin, 1976; Levin and Anderson, 1976; Calvert, Huston, Watkins, and Wright, 1982; Campbell, Wright, and Huston, 1987; Susman, 1978). At about age eight these salient features give way to informational cues. This may indicate that children with high cognitive development use more schematic processing of content (Calvert, Huston, Watkins, and Wright, 1982).

One important element to consider here is a child's ability to distinguish advertising from programming. Several studies (Wartella, 1980; Schneider, 1989; Ward, 1972; Ward and Wackman, 1973; Price, 1978, cited in Himmelstein, 1984; Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Roedder, 1981) suggest that children are the most avid commercial watchers, but may not separate them from the shows they are watching. Some suggest (Blatt, Spencer, and Ward, 1972; Ward, Reale, and Levinson, 1972; Ward and Wackman, 1973) that simple distinctions (e.g., ads are shorter) are made around age 5. As age increases, so does the complexity of distinctions drawn by children. Seven- to ten-year-olds can identify intent with some forms of content (Price, 1978, cited in Himmelstein, 1984). During this age children also begin to gather more types of information in processing advertising content.

Studies of comprehension also suggest age-related differences in media processing. Younger children depend more heavily on the visual images to understand content and often have widely varying interpretations (Ward, Wackman and Wartella, 1977). Children under age 5-6 have difficulty separating fantasy and reality in programming (Susman, 1978; Noble, 1975), thus making the impact of salient visual and auditory features more important. Young children have more difficulty "screening out" irrelevant elements in content (Van Evra, 1990; Collins, 1975). For example, Stutts and Hunnicutt (1987) and Palmer and McDowell (1979) found that young children do not comprehend subtle cues such as verbal disclaimers in a toy commercial or "separator" messages that identify the approach of an advertisement, especially when complex visual stimuli are present.

Comprehension differences disappear with age (Collins, in Bryant and Anderson, 1983), perhaps as a function of increased interpersonal contact with non-family members and developments in conceptual and symbolic skills develop around ages 7-8 (Rubin, 1986). These skills include understanding the relevant connections between separate stimuli (Anderson and Smith, 1984). Collins and his colleagues (Collins, 1970; Collins, Wellman, Keniston, and Westby, 1978; Collins, 1982) found that children in second or

third grade also develop skills necessary to process more complex content features (e.g., time-sequencing the plot of a story). Older children also develop more elaborate tests of reality or "believability" of content, relying less on perceptual cues and more on prior experience or what is "probably" real (Gardner and Krasny Brown, 1984; Dorr, 1983; Wright and Huston, 1981; Dorr, 1986).

Identifying the intent of the ad is a relevant part of media content comprehension. Macklin (1987) found that even on non-verbal measures of comprehension, a small minority of preschool children identified the relationship between the commercial and its intended outcome (a purchase). Robertson and Rossiter (1974) found that this is dependent on a series of complex distinctions separating the programs, commercials, audience, and advertisers in the child's mind. Older kids are better able to determine the intent of television content (Blosser and Roberts, 1985). Around the third grade, children began to use more sources of information in deriving meaning from content (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977; Rossiter and Robertson, 1977).

Recall studies seem to mirror these age-related differences. Van Evra (1990) reviews several studies that indicate younger children were more likely to recall visual images instead of verbal content. Children below the age of six were better at recognition tests than any long-term information recall of content. In advertising, 7-10-year-olds develop a deep cynicism as products are purchased and fail to live up to the the ad's claims (Stoneman and Brody, 1983). By 11-12 years, the cynicism is balanced with a more realistic view of advertising. However, there is no evidence that negative attitudes toward advertising translate to products or specific brands (Van Evra, 1984; Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Sheikh, Prasad, and Rao, 1974; Rossiter, 1980; Berger, 1980). Riecken and Yavas (1990) reported that negative attitudes toward advertising in general and some product categories (like over-the-counter drugs) do not influence children's opinions of specific brands of those products or their desire to buy them. This relationship is

maintained into adolescence (Ross, Campbell, Wright, Huston, Rice, and Turk, 1984; Rossiter and Robertson, 1977).

The real concern, of course, is the effects of advertising on minds that may not be able to fairly view or process the information presented. Signorielli (1991) reviews several studies that indicate children may be learning lifestyle decisions from ads. For example, children cannot understand what "part of a balanced breakfast" means and therefore don't know what it is except for the cereal (Atkin and Gibson, 1978). Goldberg's (1990) Quebec study showed that children who watched more toy and cereal advertisements on television reported more toy brand recognition and having more advertised cereals in their home than children who were not exposed to the ads on English-speaking stations. Roedder, Sternthal, and Calder (1983) conducted two studies of 4th and 8th graders that found younger children more quickly rejected their favorite product for a competing brand after watching only one commercial. 8th graders were more likely to indicate a consistent preference for a brand, even if it was not advertised. Van Evra (1990) and Adler et. al. (1977) reviewed studies that show these effects have also been measured in increased requests for products from parents and conflicts when the requests are denied.

It is plain that with age, a child is better able not only to select relevant information from media and commercial content, but he/she is better able to process that information as well. Increases in cognitive skills allow the child to select information rather than perceptual cues, process that information more critically, and use prior experience in evaluating messages. While there is much left to be explored, this group of studies has shed some light on how television seems to affect children and how children might begin to deal with the medium.

The biggest reason for these investigations was to guide policy making by the federal government. Indeed, federal agencies like the Federal Communications Commission and Federal Trade Commission initiated requests for projects and reviews of literature. What the researcher has discovered, though, is that legislators have largely

ignored the relevant findings in their decisions on children's advertising. According to Kunkel and Roberts (1991) and Kunkel (1988a), FCC decision making revealed that research findings are not a dominant influence on policy decisions. This is especially true in the 1978 attempt by the FTC to propose a ban or severe restrictions on children's advertising. In short, the research work was ignored in favor of industry goals.

Ward, Wackman, and Wartella (1977) note that government regulation has three major problems: 1) legislating on a case-by-case basis means lots of time and money are spent on research, 2) the political nature of the topic makes it hard to use any theory or research, and 3) any ad's impact varies with age of child, so it is impractical to limit industry to standards based on any one category (e.g., infants). In short, the halls of government are too dominated by politics to make research relevant to the proceedings. One reason for this "turned back" may be that policy makers often have very narrow questions on "hot issues" that receive press attention. This may lead to research that lacks external validity and opens the findings to arguments that the sampling characteristics of the commercial are unknown, so conclusions are impossible to draw (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977 and Bryant and Anderson, 1983).

The Camel campaign provides an excellent example of such a scenario. A group with a decided anti-smoking agenda (the AMA) released damning reports about the intentions of tobacco companies regarding children. The *JAMA* studies on Camel cigarette ads were attacked immediately in the press and Congress as flawed in design, definition, and measurement. R.J. Reynold's cited a number of flaws in the *JAMA* studies (Perrone, 1992): 1) market share had been "basically flat" for years, giving no evidence of dramatic increases in smoking; 2) the studies included 18-year-olds, who can legally smoke; 3) logo recognition of the camel by children does not equal intent to purchase the product; and 4) smoking in subjects' homes by parents was under-reported and could have been a big influence over teenager's urge to smoke.

The result was a lack of public outcry and response to the warnings. *Ad Age* and *Adweek's Marketing Week* (Warner, 1991; Warner, 1992) reported little notice of the Surgeon General Antonia Novello's calls for action and even less to those of Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis Sullivan. In short, the industry view prevailed. This is not surprising, considering that the Leadership Council on Advertising (Green, 1990) estimates 4,000 jobs would be lost and about 165 publications would fold if tobacco ads were banned.

Perhaps a second drawback in confronting legislators with such research is the nature of inquiry into television effects. Bryant and Anderson (1983) praise techniques of measuring children's attention and response to many formal features of television, technical advances in methodology and designing comprehension questions, even in the ability to modify/create stimuli. Most of the research advances cited involve technical capabilities in looking at the television. When "hot issues" about children must be resolved by press time, there is little time to ponder over complicated research. Little attention was given to assessing the child's construction of meaning from these cues, only to how their physiological responses are measured to a barrage of complicated experimental situations. Policy makers were often too busy to make sense of the research.

The government had become increasingly reliant on the "raised eyebrow" approach to regulation, indicating preferences for self-regulatory measures over any formal regulation (Kunkel, 1988b). Research had been used extensively in the 1970's to bring new sets of restrictions on the amount of commercial content in children's programs and on the content of those commercials (Kunkel and Roberts, 1991). During the 1980's, though, the Federal Communication Commission moved to deregulate the broadcast industry. This movement unleashed a free market system that has given us children's media driven by the forces of supply and demand. The 1984 decision to deregulate allowed broadcasters to count public service announcements and short vignettes as children's programming

(*Broadcasting*, 5/20/91). However, the FCC did not take any information or research on children's television into account when the rules were repealed.

The commission was later forced to reconsider the decision after a suit was brought by Action for Children's Television (Kunkel, 1988b). The free market policies were widely criticized by children's advocates. ACT said of the decision, "The marketplace FCC of the 1980's. . .has created a public interest mess" (*Broadcasting*, 5/20/91). Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1989) stated that in a free market philosophy, consumers have the freedom to choose "(b)ut children cannot make informed decisions, nor do they have freedom of choice, their minds are made up as soon as they see flashy ads or television programs connected to a toy."

The shifts in the regulatory climate were the death knell for daily children's programming on the major networks (Kunkel, 1988b). The free market philosophy created a vast hole in programming for a very large audience. Though the government preferred self-regulation, the industry now would fall under the control of economic forces that would increase commercial content, and the number of deceptive ads, in kids' shows. Voluntary regulations, such as the National Association of Broadcasters Television Code, were given reign with natural marketplace controls. However, such codes were seldom enforced and did not count all broadcasters among their members (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977). The late Howard Gossage, a veteran copy writer and ad industry critic, once said that trying to explain responsibility to advertisers was "like trying to convince an eight-year-old that (sex) is more fun than (eating) a chocolate ice cream cone" (*CQ Researcher*, 1991).

One factor fueling the economically driven broadcast industry is the increase in channels available to viewers through new cable/satellite technology. From 1980-85 the number of independent stations doubled, but viewing increased by only 10% (Kunkel, 1988b). More stations were fighting for a shrinking market. The result was a "barter" approach to programming that gave a company free ad time in return for programming.

These are also called "program length commercials," whereby the shows producer bases the concept on a toy marketed to kids. Recent examples include "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe," "Strawberry Shortcake," and others. In 1985-86, 19 such shows were on the air and 10 reached 3/4 of the nation's homes. In 1987, 33 such shows were available (Weinstein, 1989). The result has been a glut of children's television with as much attention to toy-awareness as there is to production value. Jon Mandel, Grey Advertising, N.Y. on kids' programming: "Virtually all of it's garbage. . . .there's nothing terribly exciting, no real programming breakthroughs" (in Kornriech, 1991).

Changes in advertisement content augmented this new torrent of children's programming. The deregulation of the 1980's and the advent of the 10- and 15-second spot made it possible to expose kids to as much as 21 commercials per hour in 1988 (Condry, Bence, and Scheibe, 1988) despite still using 10-12 minutes per hour for them (*Broadcasting*, 4/29/91). Between these syndicated shows and traditional Saturday morning fare, children's advertising began to boom. Spending on Saturday morning network shows was expected to be $230 million last year, with an additional $190 million on spot and syndicated kids' programming (Kornriech, 1991). The rise in independent local stations paralleled increases in deceptive advertising. Of the 60 commercials cited as deceptive by the Children's Advertising Review Board over 1983-87, 58 were on non-network, independent stations (Armstrong and Brucks, 1988). Jeffrey, Bolin, Lemnitzer, Hickey, Hess, and Stroud (1980) concluded that television advertising research has led to a sophisticated selling technology, making the medium the prime consumer socializing agent for children. Other media would soon join this boom in kids' marketing.

With the television glut, new media began to offer ways to target children in both primary and secondary markets. James McNeal (in Kornriech, 1991) states it most clearly, "If the 1980's made children a legitimate market, in the 1990's we'll see one notch higher than that, as nontraditional advertisers get involved." Print magazines have emerged as one medium naturally adaptable to approaches that emphasize the visual over the informational.

Rita Weisskoff (1985), director of the Council of Better Business Bureaus' Children's Advertising Review Board states, "Our review of them (kids' magazines) suggests that print is now providing exciting vehicles for advertising directly to children. What's new is not only the dramatic increase in their number but also the high quality--and the slickness, if you will--of the way they look" (p. RC-12). In 1986 there were 85 children's mags, in 1989 the figure nearly doubled to 160 (Kornriech, 1991).

To create effective messages, advertisers were taking some valuable lessons from television and applying them to print campaigns. Among the hints for kids advertising given by one agency representative were: 1) know your niche in the kids market, 2) position your product for that niche, 3) "talk the talk" by using children's slang, 4) pictures sell, and 5) make it fun (Kurnit, 1992).

Drawing any close comparisons between such vastly different channels of communication can be problematic. Bryant and Anderson (1983) argue that treating the medium as a unitary entity is dangerous because the differences between media can often make one message look like two separate ideas. However, perhaps perceptual salience of media stimuli is the more relevant consideration. Signorielli (1991, pp. 34-37) reviews several studies which list features that attract, maintain, or decrease attention from children. These salient features were deemed by some studies to be more attention grabbing than the content of the story contained within those elements. Unsurprisingly, they contained use of animation, color, and emotional appeals--features no longer unique to television.

Such strategies are smart marketing for the advertiser (Singer and Singer, 1983). Commercials rely more on recognition memory than information retrieval for their success; brand awareness is the key goal. The market research undertaken by advertisers is necessarily geared toward that short-term goal. Highly salient ads can increase product favorability and image with kids 8-10 years old after only 1 exposure, so attention factors are of prime importance (Goldberg and Gorn, 1983). Van Evra (1990) reviews several studies which conclude that ads have therefore come to rely more on emotional, attention

getting appeals that blur the line between programs and commercials. This leads to fallacious arguments and half-truths in an attempt to mask the emotional appeal of the ad (Cheney, 1983; Rutherford, 1988; Nelson, 1983; Nelson, 1987; Miller, 1987).

Here, of course, is where the "Joe Camel" campaign put itself in controversy's path. The designer for the Old Joe campaign credits his creation of three images for the brand's success: the camel, the car, and the "beautiful babe" (Bird, 1991). The situations all showed "Joe Smooth" in exciting places with fast cars, planes, and other settings that might draw the envy of any person with aspirations of attractiveness. The Camel campaign's use of brightly colored cartoon characters in a poster give-a-way automatically targeted kids, who are more likely to save posters (Green, 1990). The campaign ran heavily in *Rolling Stone, National Lampoon, Sports Illustrated, and Movies U.S.A.* which all include a substantial portion of young people in their circulation.

The effects of the campaign on children unmistakable--kids had fallen into the approach as a secondary market. Kinsey (1987) cited British studies showed that cigarette campaigns did have a great impact on brand awareness among children despite being banned from broadcast media. The *JAMA* studies found equally high logo recognition for Joe Camel and Mickey Mouse among 229 preschool children (Fischer, Schwartz, Richards, Goldstein, and Rojas, 1991), young children were more likely to recognize, remember, and like Camel cigarettes based on their exposure to the Joe Camel campaign (DiFranza, et. al., 1991), and that the "cool" or "smooth" image of the campaign had a positive correlation with a rise in teen cigarette purchases and brand preference (Pierce, et. al., 1991). An *Ad Age* (Levin, 1992) survey of young children and teens on cigarette ads found that 90% of younger kids and 75% of the teens identified Camel as a brand of cigarettes. About 46% said they saw the ads on outdoor billboards, and 37% in magazines; 59% of teens saw the ads in magazines and 34% on outdoor billboards.

No matter what parents or educators try to do to protect children from sophisticated advertising, the plain fact is that they will encounter it. In the early 1980's,

children spent more time watching shows like the *Dukes of Hazzard* and *The A-Team* than all Saturday morning shows combined (Weisskoff, 1985). This also means exposure to adult commercials. Gorn and Florsheim (1985) found that 9- and 10-year-old girls exposed to ads for adult lipstick and diet soft drink products were found to have greater preferences for these products, even though they were not in the market for them. The commercials for lipstick were also found to influence what the girls thought was necessary to be "beautiful" and attractive in the adult world.

It is obvious that even in print and outdoor media, the use of similar salient features will have some appeal to a young audience. While there is no doubt as to important differences between broadcast and print media, the goals of electronic and print campaigns are the same on the surface. Both strategies employ similar features in their messages. The danger is that researchers focus too much on assessing the changes in technology and fail to examine the way children process the salient message features. In order to isolate meaning of various formal production features, researchers have relied on experimental designs. Investigations of a less experimental nature may be able to gauge the influence of mediating factors on mass media content, such as co-viewing with family members or peers, social interaction outside the home, and even the child's initial training as a consumer in various purchasing situations.

Research on children's media programming and advertising has little, if any, audience with government and industry officials. Confronted with such a climate for their work, researchers might start exploring how children process media and advertising content and use this information in consumer settings. In short, much of the previous investigation has been directed toward the medium and policy making. Research will be more fruitful if studies are directed toward what kids do with media rather than what media do to kids.

Some of the most promising research in the last twenty years (Signorielli, 1991; Van Evra, 1990; McNeal, 1987; Bryant and Anderson, 1983; Adler, 1980; Adler, et. al.,

1979; and Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977) has elaborated on skills development and acquisition among children. This includes a more basic investigation of issues, such as how children select, evaluate, and use advertising information in making consumer decisions. By fully exploring such questions, children's media research may provide real answers to all concerned parties. A cognitive development view of this processing certainly allows for an exploration of the mental strategies that go into selecting information and using it to make consumer decisions. Several areas of information processing development in children should be researched.

One subject of such future research might be an investigation of how children view media content. Rather than as a complex cerebral exercise, young children's media viewing might be seen more as an imaging and processing of perceptual stimuli (Cullingsford, 1984). They recognize forms of media and reject images inconsistent with their expectations and previous experience. The perceptual stimuli are often the basis for the meaning children construct. What we do not know here is what young children do with the stimuli to which they attend. Fast cuts, animation, quick music, color, etc. all result in increased attention to the screen (at least on visual measures), but are all of these images used to construct meaning? On what basis does a child select stimuli for further processing?

The answer may be different in various viewing situations. Past the age of 5 or 6 years, children may begin to watch and read mass media in drastically different ways depending on their socialization environment (Bechtel, et. al., 1972). Salomon (1979) suggests that viewers process media at differing levels of complexity--ranging from superficial consumption of content to fully processing and extracting information from media codes. The attention and comprehension capabilities of various formal features has been charted. The extent of their influence over potential consumer behavior may deserve more study, though. Understanding the switch from primarily perceptual to informational

content in making consumer decisions is the key to helping kids enter the consumer world as smoothly as possible.

Studies focusing solely on attention to or comprehension of stimuli indicate that many experimental designs may be testing for adult comprehension when children are simply interpreting a new symbol set. Rice, Huston, and Wright (1982) define three levels of representation a child must learn to process television content: 1) literal audio/visual portrayal of real-world information, 2) forms and conventions without real-world counterparts (e.g., zooms, pans, etc.), and 3) symbolic forms that are not unique to television (green lights, etc.). When adults deem that content or story to be important, they fail to grasp how much active viewing has gone into interpreting new perceptual symbols and how much has been learned about media codes.

This difficulty may also manifest itself in studies of children's comprehension of media content. Wartella (1980) determined that though young children can non-verbally express the advertiser's intent, it is difficult to assume that this means actual understanding of the commercial. Signorielli (1991) defines several factors influencing children's comprehension of media content that are worthy of further study. First is the way children encode media stimuli, especially those common to more than one form of advertising. It may be that other media commonly seen by children (story books, magazines, and others) influence the way television codes are interpreted (or vice versa). Second is the segmentation of meaning, how younger children may divide content stimuli into "smaller chunks" in constructing their meaning of media stimuli. Signorielli (1991), Van Evra (1990), and Ward, Wackman, and Wartella (1977) all point to studies that show the benefits of increased knowledge of advertising and story forms, or "grammar," when children process media content.

Such design disparities may even surface in studies which examine the ways children distinguish fantasy from reality in content. Bryant and Anderson (1983) observe that most studies examining children's reality-testing focus on the perceived reality of the

viewer versus the reality of the actual world. Dorr (in Bryant and Anderson, 1983) argues that the latter concept must be viewed in the child's terms, not those of the adult experimenter, focusing on why the child says it is real or not. In some cases these measures may indeed reveal a firm grasp of reality of kids with limited "world knowledge." Collins (in Bryant and Anderson, 1983) argues that skills like drawing inferences between disconnected scenes are crucial in comprehending content. These skills are held by adults but not children, rendering it difficult for them to construct "reality" from media content. This would be particularly true of children who have not developed inference skills or with complex content above any child's cognitive abilities.

The development of inference skills in media viewing is another stage of cognitive development that may provide interesting insights for research. Under what circumstances does a child first recognize that meaning is "incomplete" between two disparate, but contiguous, scenes? Such situations may be too complex for young children to maintain attention, but at what stage of development will these cues become part of the child's cognitive arsenal? This information might shed some interesting light on the types of formal features that will encourage accurate inference drawing in young viewers.

Most importantly, all of this work will need to account for the co-viewing and consumer environments. Bryant and Anderson (1983) review studies that point to significant comprehension gains of complex content in young kids watching with adults. Experimental designs will obviously not work in such settings, but it is possible to use quasi-experimental and field observation techniques to assess the impact of the viewing environment on a child's information processing skills. Ward, Wackman, and Wartella (1977) provide some idea of this in their study of the child's "consumer socialization process," how parents train their children to be accurate, critical consumers of advertising, goods, and services.

The limitations of such work can be great. Goldberg's (1990) quasi-experimental study outlines the different effects of children's advertising between French- and English-

speaking households. Though children watching English-speaking television experienced greater effects, the study has a more difficult time accounting for possible cultural influences over television viewing. Salomon's (1979) cross-cultural comparisons of American and Israeli children certainly introduced the notion that television watching is a vastly different experience between two cultures. While such cultural differences in media processing can present experimental difficulties, they may also yield needed information on children's assimilation into the consumer world.

If such research is undertaken, it seems quite promising that we will know a great deal more about the development of children's minds, especially as they are socialized through use of mass media. This investigation could give us a more complete picture of the progression of cognitive skills and how they are influenced by broadcast and print messages. Such knowledge has potential applications in three areas: media literacy programs in schools, parent-child interaction in consumer settings, and the advertising industry itself.

School media literacy programs are certainly one endeavor that can instantly benefit from knowledge of children's media processing skills. The Center for Media Values (*CQ Researcher*, 1991) warns that current U.S. media literacy efforts lag behind nations in Europe, Canada, and Australia in public school education programs. Research on small portions of instruction does show that a more direct educational approach may be necessary. Brucks, Armstrong, and Goldberg (1988) report two studies that found children did not spontaneously activate cognitive defenses to advertising messages, even when they knew of potential advertising techniques in advance. The children had to be cued directly to activate the responses rather than using them through non-directive probe questions. However, Ward, Wackman, and Wartella (1977) state that the cognitive model underlying information processing research makes it possible to identify existing skills and effective teaching strategies with any age child. This work has shown it can be effective

with children in kindergarten, who could understand explanations about persuasive intent and learn how to find information on advertised products.

Research directed merely toward educational efforts may not be enough. Armstrong and Brucks (1988) state that the ideal of education programs gives way to some realities of the public school system: budget crunches, lack of consistent curriculum quality, no means of monitoring curricula or quality of instruction. Indeed, many administrators may question if such an effort is the responsibility of the public school. This is a valid question in light of the previous work that shows children do not spontaneously activate cognitive defenses to advertising messages. Schools and kids cannot do this work alone--nor should they. Educating children about advertising must be combined with some point-of-viewing reminders to counter "unfair ads" as they are viewed. These reminders can come from two other areas that may benefit from research on more basic research on media processing skills: parents and advertisers.

By widening the focus to the parent-child relationship, research could more accurately chart intervening factors in media content processing. Liebert, et. al. (1982) note that strong parental interaction mediated the increase in product requests among children exposed to ads for children's products, especially for younger children. Ward, Wackman, and Wartella (1977) found that neither amount of exposure to television nor opportunity for independent purchasing were as strong an influence in developing cognitive consumer skills.

The latter study outlined three types of parental guidance over the "socialization" of a child into consumer situations. Parent-child interaction worked best with younger children. This may be defined as direct purposive training (e.g., in a supermarket) or indirect, as in the discussion of commercials while watching television together. A second method was parental modeling of various behaviors such as budgeting, bargain-hunting, etc., which worked best with children after age 9-10 years. The third method of consumer education between parents and children is the opportunity for independent

consumption behavior, or kids buying their own goods. Of the three methods, this was shown to be least effective in teaching children about consumer skills and information processing in media settings.

The problem is that this final form of education may be getting the most use. McNeal (1991) states that kids spend $6.2 billion of their own money each year--$2.3 billion from kids ages 4-12 alone. Teens now spend about $56 billion annually (Schwartz, 1990). By the first grade most children have made their first independent purchase in a convenience store on snacks and the average 10-year-old shops there 250 times every year.

The most disturbing evidence from research on children's consumer development may be how little parents know or can control about the process (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977). It is clear that parent-child interaction is intermittent and "hit or miss." Any efforts by parents are usually indirect or unintentional, and few mothers engage in purposive consumer training. The difficulty here lies in the amount of consumer education the parent has attained and might unwittingly pass on. This is especially true in low status households, where parents know less about consumer situations and young children have the most spending money available. Low socioeconomic children have more to spend until about 6th grade, when levels of spending money are more equal.

This spending is level in all types of economic times because parents always "put kids first." McNeal (in Kornriech, 1991) notes that the cause of all of this spending growth may be the dramatic rise in two-career and single-parent households (i.e., parental guilt for not spending time with kids). As time runs out and patience wears thin, parents are more likely to acquiesce to their children's consumer demands. There is some evidence (Wiman, 1983) to indicate that parental intervention can be an effective educational tool, but that such intervention does not happen very often at all (Roberts, 1983).

This is where advertisers can focus some of their own research energy on campaigns that will encourage the child's active processing of content. With over $700 million directed at children's marketing campaigns, some of the effort can certainly be

directed at more in-depth studies of the way kids examine and process advertising content. Consumer Reports (August, 1990) issued a report on the advent of "kids' clubs" that are used by companies like Burger King and MTV to market all sorts of products, but for little other reason. These "clubs" could easily include a prosocial message rather than only a catalogue sales scheme. So one might argue that the tools are there to launch separate campaigns with these messages or to help parents with the task of consumer training.

Marketing campaigns and educational curricula can target parents and children in ways that encourage their interaction in consumer settings (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977). Advertisers have long argued that parents are the ultimate mediators and educators of children, so such an approach might help them encourage such a relationship. This can help parents learn more effective ways to socialize their kids into modern consumerism. For example, by supplying educational material to children about the nutritional content of food or qualities of clothing materials, advertisers might provide parents and children a dialogue on shopping criteria at an earlier age. Parents are then provided an opportunity to see what their child buys--and more importantly why the child buys.

On more pragmatic terms, this may benefit the advertiser in some very big ways. First, such an approach may counter parent concerns of "targeting kids for profit" and provide them with useful information to use in teaching their kids about consumerism. Second, advertisers can easily base appeals on those attributes that will appeal to each age and still provide some media literacy education. Young kids respond to store displays, but may also respond to product demonstrations of perceptual attributes of the product or even trial use of the product. As older kids begin to look at other product attributes and the informational content of the commercial brand loyalty can be maintained by introducing new attributes of the product for them.

Third, individual advertisers could take positive steps by building campaigns around prosocial themes. The industry supported Ad Council spent $1.34 billion in 1990 on public service announcements (PSA's) against drug use, AIDS prevention, and other

causes (CQ Researcher, 1991). Studies by Atkin, Hocking and Block (1984), Jeffrey, McLellarn, and Fox (1982), and Peterson, Jeffrey, Bridgwater, and Dawson (1984) all show evidence that PSA messages can work with children on prosocial themes. Christenson (1982) found that PSA's have increased recognition and understanding of commercials by kids. While much of the previous work has been built the PSA approach, such themes can be built into current marketing campaigns without compromising their effectiveness. For example, product awareness can still be established if McDonald's customers were shown attending a drug prevention meeting with their children before grabbing a cheeseburger.

It is clear that if we are going to use any of the previous work done on children's processing of media content, future research must fix its goal squarely on questions of long-term importance. While studies about Joe Camel's popularity may help make headlines, they do not seem to guide government or industry policies in any useful direction. By assessing more basic questions about how children select, process, and use media content, researchers will be able to provide society information with which kids, parents, and advertisers can really do something.

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